The Importance of Pathology in IgG4-RD Diagnosis and Care



Q&A WITH LYNN CORNELL, MD

Q. What is pathology?

Broadly, pathology is the study of disease. Pathologists are medical doctors who specialize in diagnosing and monitoring diseases. In the field of anatomic pathology, pathologists examine tissue samples and cells under the microscope to diagnose disease. In the field of laboratory medicine, pathologists oversee testing of blood, urine, and other body fluids. Pathologists also help determine which tests are most appropriate and interpret the results with the treating clinician to guide patient care.

Q. What role does pathology play in diagnosing IgG4-RD?

Pathology is one of the most important aspects of diagnosing IgG4-RD. Many times, patients come in with a mass that raises a concern for cancer. Examination of a tissue biopsy can help distinguish IgG4-RD from cancer and other conditions. Pathologists look for characteristic patterns of inflammation and scarring, along with increased numbers of IgG4-positive plasma cells. These findings must be interpreted together with the patient's clinical presentation and other test results to establish an accurate diagnosis.

Q. How can pathologists work alongside other clinicians in comprehensive care for IgG4-RD?

Communication between pathologists and treating clinicians is essential, particularly for diseases like IgG4-RD that can be difficult to diagnose. When patients present with symptoms or abnormal test results, pathologists work alongside other specialists to help identify further testing that can evaluate for other diseases that mimic IgG4-RD. Once a diagnosis is confirmed, we continue to communicate with other specialists to order tests and identify if there are other organs being impacted by the disease.

> Examination of a tissue biopsy can help **distinguish IgG4-RD from cancer and other conditions.**

Q. What barriers prevent patients from accessing a pathologist?

The greatest barrier to accessing a pathologist is lack of awareness. Patients may not be aware of our role or see us in the clinic, but we see them all the time: We see and interpret their labs and results daily. If a patient is still searching for answers regarding their signs, symptoms or biopsy results, they can advocate for themselves and request that their biopsies be sent to a specialized pathologist for consultation and further analysis.

Q. What can policymakers do to increase access to pathologists?

Policymakers can invest in campaigns aimed at increased awareness of pathology, and support access to pathology services, including specialized consultation for patients with rare diseases such as IgG4-RD. Pathology touches every area of medicine, and yet patients often have little understanding of how pathologists contribute to their diagnosis and treatment. Greater awareness can help patients ask informed questions and advocate for appropriate diagnostic evaluation.



> The **greatest barrier** to accessing a pathologist is lack of awareness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn Cornell, MD, is an internationally recognized renal pathologist, professor, and academic department head of pathology and laboratory medicine.

AfPA | Alliance for Patient Access

The Alliance for Patient Access is a national network of policy-minded health care providers advocating for patient-centered care.

AllianceforPatientAccess.org